

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

Frequently Asked Questions

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

What is Chronic Wasting Disease?

CWD is a nervous system disease of deer and elk. It belongs to the family of diseases known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE's) or prion diseases. Though it shares certain features with other TSE's like bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("Mad Cow Disease") or scrapie in sheep, it is a distinct disease apparently affecting only deer and related species. CWD occurs in wild deer and elk. CWD has also been found on elk farms in Colorado, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

What are the Signs of CWD in Deer?

CWD attacks the brains of infected deer and elk, causing the animals to become emaciated, display abnormal behavior, lose bodily functions and die. Signs identified in captive deer include excessive salivation, loss of appetite, progressive weight loss, excessive thirst and urination, listlessness, teeth grinding, holding the head in a lowered position, and drooping ears. Many of these signs can also be caused by other diseases known in Wisconsin deer, such as Cranial Abscessation Syndrome, (a bacterial disease of the brain) or malnutrition. CWD is a slowly progressive disease; signs are usually not seen until the animal is 18mths of age or older.

How is CWD Transmitted ?

The mode of transmission between deer is not completely understood. It is thought that the disease can be passed between animals in a herd and also perhaps from close contact between mother and offspring. The prion which causes the disease is an abnormal version of a protein that normally occurs in the animals cells. It is not easily killed by environmental factors, heat or disinfection, so transmission from a contaminated environment may also be possible.

How is CWD Diagnosed?

Brain samples are collected from dead deer and are examined microscopically using special stains to identify the CWD prion. A research team in Colorado has recently developed the first live animal test for CWD, based on the collection of tonsil samples for microscopic examination. This test seems to work well in deer, but not in elk.

What do we know about CWD in Wisconsin Deer?

Wisconsin has tested over 1000 free-ranging white-tailed deer for CWD since 1999. Three CWD positive deer were identified from sampling done during the 2001 Gun Deer Season. All three deer were harvested from Dane County, Deer Management Unit 70A. All three were bucks 2 ½ -3 years of age. In total, 82 deer were tested from the unit 70A area. Statewide, 345 samples from the 2001 gun deer season were tested. With the exception of the three positives, all other samples were negative. All CWD tests performed in 1999 and 2000 were found to be negative.

Is CWD Transmissible to Humans?

CWD has been known to occur in deer and elk in the USA for decades. In spite of ongoing surveillance for similar disease syndromes in humans, there has never been an instance of people contracting a disease from butchering or eating meat from CWD-infected animals. A World Health Organization (WHO) panel of experts reviewed all the available information on CWD and concluded that there is no scientific evidence that CWD can infect humans. However, there is much that scientists still do not know about CWD, and one cannot state that transmission of CWD to humans is absolutely impossible.

Is it Still Safe to Eat Venison From Wisconsin Deer?

Chronic Wasting Disease has been known to occur in deer and elk in the USA for decades. In spite of ongoing surveillance for similar disease syndromes in humans, there has never been an instance of people contracting a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) disease from butchering or eating venison. CWD has not been linked to the human TSE disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, in the way that "mad cow disease" has been in Europe. The prion that is believed to cause CWD accumulates in specific parts of infected animals – the brain, eyes, spinal cord, lymph nodes, tonsils and spleen. Therefore, these tissues should not be eaten from any deer. Health officials additionally advise that humans and other animals should not consume any part of an animal with visible signs or confirmed infection of CWD

As a Processor, How Can I Dispose of Deer?

Three rendering companies currently plan to pickup inedible venison at processing plants.

- 1.) Superior Services, Sheboygan, WI 888-688-4005 ext. 159 Attn: Paul Herrmann
- 2.) National By-Products, Berlin, WI 920-361-2092
- 3.) Darling International, Blue Earth, MN 507-526-3296

You may also contact your local sanitary landfill service to determine if they will accept inedible venison.

If I Shoot a Deer Outside the Intensive Harvest Zone What Can I Do With the Animal if I Don't Want to Use the Meat?

Through three years of sampling deer since 1999, the only deer that have been found to test positive for CWD in the wild population are the deer found within the Eradication Zone. Still, if you don't wish to keep your deer, then here are your options:

- Ask others if they are interested in the venison.
- Check with the local processor cooperating with the food pantry program.
- Dispose of the carcass at one of the cooperating landfills or drop off sites contracted by the Department. A list will be provided for each county when contracts are secured.

If I Shoot a Deer On My Own Property Can I Dispose of the Carcass or Butchered Waste on My Own Land?

Yes, if done in a safe manner. Make sure the bottom of the hole you dig is at least 5 feet above the water table and away from surface water. Also make sure you are far enough away from any drinking water sources (at least 50 feet). Dig the hole deep enough and cover with soil to keep scavengers away and control odors.

If I Shoot a Deer on Property I Do Not Own But Have the Landowners Permission to Dispose of Butchered Waste or Carcasses on Their Property Can I Legally Do So?

Yes, but it must be disposed of on the property where shot, given the same conditions listed in the previous question. The Department is preparing an exemption to allow for this disposal activity to occur for this hunting season.

If I Shoot a Deer in the Intensive Harvest Zone and Do Not Want the Meat Where Can I Dispose of the Carcass?

The DNR has three registration stations in the IHZ. The stations will be taking any unwanted carcass from this zone only.

Do I Need to Register the Deer Even if I End Up Disposing of the Carcass?

YES, you must register the animal so the Department knows what management zone the animal came from and what proper disposal options are required.

What should I do if I Observe or Harvest a Deer that I Suspect Might Have CWD?

Call the local DNR office or the DNR Wildlife Health Team (608-267-6751, 608-221-5375) right away. The DNR will make every effort to collect samples from the possibly affected deer for CWD testing.

What will be Done to Manage CWD in Wisconsin Deer?

The state and USDA are gathering all available information about the CWD positive deer identified in Dane County and other deer tested in that area and the rest of the state. We have started additional intensive sampling of deer from the affected and adjacent regions and will be discussing the best methods to control CWD in Wisconsin's deer. The monitoring program for CWD will continue to need the assistance of hunters statewide who volunteer to have their deer sampled at registration stations. State animal health authorities are also working to learn more about the CWD status of farmed deer and elk in the state, and to control mixing of farmed and wild deer and elk.

Is CWD a Risk for Wisconsin's Livestock?

There is no evidence that CWD can be transmitted under natural conditions to cattle.

Contact: *Bureau of Wildlife Management, (608) 266-8204
or see DNR's website (www.dnr.state.wi.us), under Chronic Wasting
Disease in Wisconsin*

Revised 9/23/02